

Gays and film: an introduction

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Everybody's just a little
bit homo sexual
whether they like it or not
Everybody feels a little bit
of love for their sex
even if they almost forgot
— Allen Ginsberg

Gay film work constantly looks in two different directions. On the one hand, it is part of and inextricably bound to the gay community and the political expression of that community, the gay liberation movement in all its diversity. Gay film work — criticism, teaching, filmmaking, distribution, and exhibition — comes out of, stands as part of, and contributes to gay liberation. On the other hand, and simultaneously, gay film work is part of film culture as a whole, even when it has been and still is forced into a closet existence. This dual nature has shaped and will continue to influence gay film activity. Because of this, a Special Section on Gays and Film is itself a political act, and that means it's worthwhile — no, more than that, necessary — to start by situating this Special Section in relation to the gay movement today and in relation to the present state of film culture.

Gays have been making films and writing about them from the beginnings of cinema. Given the conditions of oppression homosexuals have faced, it is no surprise that almost all of this activity has existed in the closet, appearing in sublimated forms, with some open expression only in the artistic avant-garde. Thus one of the key tasks in developing gay film culture today is finding and reclaiming the past, and determining with as much care as is possible this repressed history. Eisenstein, Arzner, von Sternberg, Dietrich, and many hundreds more figures demand re-examination to determine their overt and covert homosexual sensibility. But any such re-examination and reclaiming of the past can only take place today in light of the vast changes in gay

consciousness following the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969 when gays militantly and spontaneously demonstrated their identities and demands en masse. Since that time we've entered a new era of open gay politics, and as a result, of open gay film criticism and film making.

"Gay and Proud," one of the spirited slogans of the gay movement, expresses this new consciousness which has been seen in the developing criticism within the gay press, such as Lee Atwell's excellent reviews in the arts and culture oriented *Gay Sunshine*, the often irrepressibly extremist reviews by various hands in the radical *Fag Rag*, and the ongoing criticism appearing in Canada's *Body Politic* and England's *Gay News* and *Gay Left*. This new era has also seen various established critics come out, such as Robin Wood. But for the most part, open gay criticism in the 70s has resided in the gay press and parts of the alternative press in North America. It hasn't been on the agenda in film studies or in the pages of film publications. That situation is changing. In England, the National Film Theatre has completed a major season on gays, and the publication by the British Film Institute of an indispensable booklet, "Gays and Film," with articles by Caroline Sheldon ("Lesbians and Film"), Richard Dyer ("Stereotyping"), and Jack Babuscio ("Camp and the Gay Sensibility"), marks the emergence of a strong gay presence in contemporary film thought. Hopefully this Special Section can establish a precedent in North America. The next step is obviously continued publication and hopefully a major retrospective and/or festival showcasing the history of gays in film, gay film people, and the work of contemporary gay filmmakers. Ideally a traveling series could emerge and be showcased around the United States and Canada.

Before going on, some clarification of terms is in order. At present in the United States there are distinct regional and political differences within the homosexual liberation movement regarding use of terms such as "gay." For many straight people the term refers to both males and females, and it is so used in parts of the movement. In some parts of the country, "gay" refers specifically to men and "lesbian" to women. Further, within the movement the terms "faggot" and "dyke" are frequently used, but because of the long history of those terms as oppressive pejoratives, they are — like the word "nigger" within the black community — not acceptable for use outside the group. Obviously the precise term is less important than the political position which informs the discussion.

Although many statements in this Special Section on "Gays and Film" apply equally to gay men and lesbians, the discussion here is written by men and refers primarily to gay men. This was a conscious decision and reflects a number of considerations. Most importantly, it reflects my concern as editor of this Special Section that the particular nature of lesbian oppression and resistance not be dealt with in a superficial way.

To simply reprint or commission a lesbian article just to "balance" the issue seemed, after much thought and discussion with the other members of the editorial board, the worst sort of liberal tokenism. The double oppression of lesbians, as homosexuals and as women, makes the development of lesbian film criticism inseparable from feminist film criticism. Clearly, while there are many similar and identical concerns in gay male and lesbian film criticism, there are also profound differences, and those must be dealt with in a direct manner. Lesbians cannot be regarded as simply a female adjunct to gay liberation: a point they have repeatedly made by separating themselves from gay males, both individually and organizationally.

(In this light it is encouraging that recently gay men and lesbians in some parts of the country have been able to work in coalition, especially around gay civil rights issues following the success of the Anita Bryant campaign against homosexuals. It should go without saying that the success of such joint work depends primarily on the ability of the men involved to work in nonsexist ways.)

Additionally, some practical concerns have shaped this decision. While JUMP CUT has already published the work of lesbian critics, submissions have been fairly rare — not surprising given the seemingly straight identification of the publication and given the left wing political orientation of JUMP CUT, which doubtless further restricts possible contributions. Furthermore, lesbian feminist criticism has an existing outlet — the lesbian and feminist press — which makes it less likely to be submitted to a film publication. There are problems for both sides even with the simple reprinting of lesbian film articles. Usually written for a specific and knowledgeable audience, they are often inappropriate for people who don't know the terms and concepts taken for granted when lesbians write for lesbians. (Or, to put it another way, such articles can't be co-opted.) The further step of soliciting articles presents additional considerations. Few radical lesbians see writing film criticism for a magazine whose readers are mostly straights as a priority activity. All of which is not to walk away from the issue. In the very process of making and discussing this Special Section, the entire JUMP CUT staff agreed that we are committed to publishing a Special Section on "Lesbians and Film" as soon as that can be accomplished, and we invite the participation of interested writers.

A further aside: even in writing this I'm painfully aware that all of this drawing of fine lines must seem absurd to some readers — a ridiculous overqualification — and to yet others an outstanding arrogance — yet another hetero male trying to get his anti-sexist credentials validated. But the nature of political work today makes it especially difficult to do justice to political reality. Contradictions are especially ripe, and the temptations of blind dogmatism and inept opportunism are powerful. But, if it is difficult for straights of both sexes and particularly men to

publicly take a position on sexual politics today, it is also essential that one try to do so. No one person, group, or tendency has a franchise on political correctness at present, and ideas and positions can only be tested in open political activity. Correct ideas, as Mao reminds us, come from practice, from the actual struggling of contradictory ideas in the arena of social action. In this sense, "coming out" is not something reserved for gay men and lesbians.

In the following articles a variety of interests and approaches appear. To begin, Tom Waugh surveys three recent gay-made films within the context of the contemporary gay movement. He discusses the mixture of political and social contradictions that shape both the production and reception of gay films and in the process suggests future directions for gay filmmaking. Looking to the past at gay images in film noir, Richard Dyer pinpoints overt and covert gay male and lesbian characters and discusses the nature of repressive stereotyping in Hollywood film. For his use of gay stereotypes, West German director Rainer Fassbinder has gained considerable notoriety, and in two reviews of his film *THE FOX (FISTRIGHT OF FREEDOM)*, Bob Cant and Andrew Britton discuss and evaluate Fassbinder's gay politics. These opposed analyses suggest some of the important issues involved in developing a gay critique. Taking another director who has frequently used gay themes and characters, Will Aitken examines Bertolucci's work and argues a new interpretation of *LAST TANGO*. To conclude the section, Tom Waugh and I offer a dialogue that we hope will show some more of the issues and implications of the section.

Taken together, and read along with the BFI "Gays and Film" booklet, these articles suggest the importance of a gay critique for film criticism in general. Obviously there is the recovery of a lost history, so that we truly understand the many contributions of gays to world cinema. More important is the recognition of the repressed — the interpretation of what has remained uninterpreted, in both open and sublimated forms. A strong part of this involves the question of gay images and stereotypes in film, a discovery and recognition of the contradictions of past cinema — both in their oppressive and negative aspects and in their liberating and positive aspects. In addition, a vital area for investigation is the contribution of gay avant-garde filmmakers. While recognized by the formalist critics who dominate this area, the work of Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, and many other openly gay experimentalists has never been done justice in terms of their major gay concerns. Such a criticism would have its own latently subversive nature, for it would undermine the very premises of formalist aesthetics, just as the accurate recognition of camp sensibility, Jack Babuscio argues, undermines the "high art" premises of establishment criticism.

But the case for gay criticism rests on more than the undeniable fact that it is necessary for a complete film history and film criticism, or its

implicit challenge to all varieties of reactionary criticism from formalism to homophobic psychoanalysis. For those of us committed to developing left film criticism and left filmmaking, gay male and lesbian consciousness is a necessary part of our work.

Gay men and lesbians have developed their consciousness in the shadow of the dominant patriarchal, straight, capitalist culture. As a result, their culture and their resistance has a dual aspect, both shaped by and resistant to the dominant ideology. In short, it is contradictory and simultaneously shows progressive and regressive aspects. The radical wing of the gay and lesbian movement has been active in criticizing the negative aspects of homosexual culture and in nurturing the positive aspects, thus accelerating the movement's liberating direction. Left cultural workers have much to learn from gay culture, just as many of us have learned from critically and actively studying black culture, another culture of resistance which is an inspiration in building a revolutionary cultural front. By "learning from" I don't mean "ripping off." Rather I mean actively understanding gay male and lesbian liberation, joining with it because only then can we have a left movement and left cultural work that is in fact rich and diverse. This is more than left toleration of homosexuals, it is more than "some of my best friends are...", it is more than left lip service to lesbian and gay male demands. First, it means genuine active support of gay civil rights, which is now the main arena of political struggle for lesbians and gay men. Second is the more difficult task of joining in struggle and unity with gay leftists.

That desirable unity will only become real through struggle — struggle against homophobia and all forms of sexism within the left as well as society at large. And that struggle will commence only when leftists come out against hetero-chauvinism and privilege. From that start we can together build a film criticism and a filmmaking that gets beyond a Special Section, that incorporates lesbian and gay male politics in everything we do.

The creation of this Special Section has been an exhilarating task for me, and I've learned on immense amount in working on it... that old theory and practice dialectic. I want to thank Tom Waugh for his tireless help and loving criticism. The entire JUMP CUT staff participated in the critique and revision of various parts of the section and in working out the politics of our joint editorial. I think we all grew from it. At a critical point, Chris Riddiough helped by discussing the politics of the editorial. Richard Dyer and Will Aitken engaged our suggested criticisms in ways that taught us in turn. Our comrades at *Gay Left* readily granted reprint rights. I hope Allen Ginsberg will understand my changing two words (but keeping the meter). Finally, I'd like to thank the lesbians and gay men who have had the patience and love to teach and criticize me: this section is some of the result.

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